

35 YEARS OF CONSERVATION

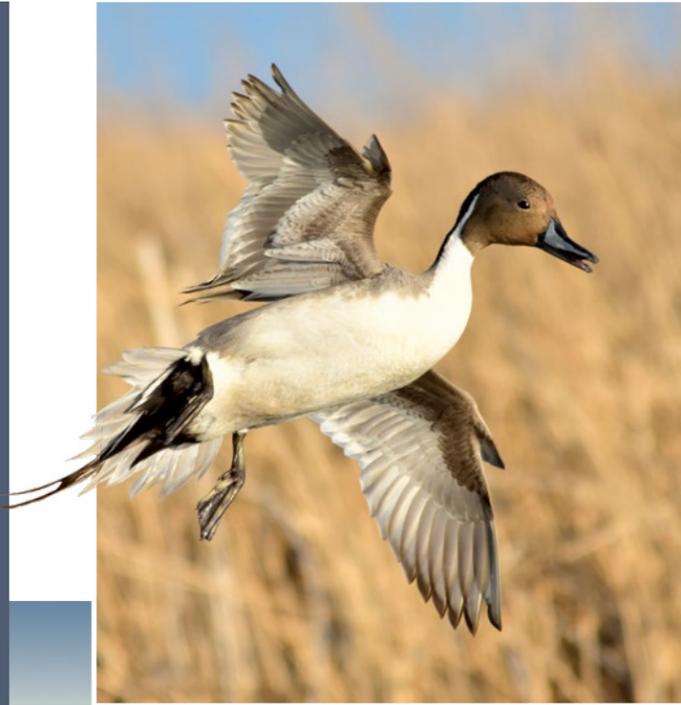


PRAIRIE POTHOLE JOINT VENTURE



Prairie Pothole
JOINT VENTURE

35 YEARS CONSERVATION



Several years ago, I was digging through old PPJV files and came across an information booth exhibit displaying several photos and bulleted topic panels mounted on a folding felt board. The kind often found at symposia and conferences. It was created in the early 1990s proclaiming the fact that agriculture and breeding bird conservation were compatible and even profitable when considered holistically.

Although the display was decades old, I was struck by how the themes are still pertinent today. Photos of functional, productive prairie pothole wetlands and native grasslands filled with breeding birds juxtaposed with photos of lifeless drained wetlands and fallowed crop fields. Panels warned of the hazards of broad-brush pesticide applications, noxious weeds, and poor agricultural practices that degrade bird habitats and farm economies alike. PPJV partners continue to promote these themes, and we have a much stronger communications capacity that reaches considerably more people compared to 35 years ago.

What has changed? Are we spinning our wheels with conservation in the Prairie Pothole Region? Grassland and wetlands loss rates outpace conservation rates. Breeding bird populations continue to decline, and although waterfowl populations are doing well relative to other bird groups, several species' population trajectories continue to be of concern.

“**The conservation community has made a very positive impact...**”

As a glass-half-full optimist, I often ask myself to envision what the region would look like without the millions of wetlands and grassland acres that have been protected into perpetuity and restored to functional habitats. The conservation community has made a very positive impact guided by the North American Waterfowl Management Plan and anchored by partners such as the National Wildlife Refuge System, state wildlife agencies, and non-governmental organizations. Although it has not been a common

occurrence in the 35 years since Migratory Bird Joint Ventures began, there is further cause for optimism with new conservation funding opportunities coming out of Washington, D.C.

As I reach the end of my tenure with the PPJV, these reflections provide the yardstick for the partnership's accomplishments and how we will be viewed 35 years from now. One of most promising observations is how the JV community promotes conservation actions now compared to when we started. While we still advance those same messages that were on the information booth panels from decades ago, we are adapting to be more relevant to our primary stakeholders: private landowners and agricultural producers. Including messages about soil health, regenerative agriculture, clean water, carbon storage, and pollinator services helps us reach more stakeholders in service of supporting the bird populations and habitat we were entrusted to conserve. 🌱

— Sean Fields, PPJV Coordinator (retired)



35 YEARS NAVI GATION

Building a Conservation Legacy in an Ever-changing Landscape



“*The manner in which wildlife management is conducted must change.*”

– 1989 PPJV Implementation Plan

While it is natural for duck populations to fluctuate, waterfowl numbers in the late 1970s dropped to all-time lows due to habitat loss and prolonged droughts. In 1986, the North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP) was introduced as a solution to this problem, becoming the largest cooperative effort ever initiated to protect wetlands, waterfowl, and other wildlife. Its founders recognized that no one group or country could achieve the Plan's goals; the task was too large and the cost too high. We needed

a new approach to have a shot at reversing waterfowl population trends, one that transcended organizational and geographical boundaries and prioritized cooperation at all levels. Thus, the concept of Joint Ventures was created.

The Prairie Pothole Joint Venture (PPJV) was one of the first six Joint Ventures established under NAWMP in 1987, representing a coordinated commitment between state and federal agencies and non-governmental organizations. Creating a functional partnership required the first participants to integrate attitudes and ideas, build trust, and find a shared sense of purpose. Dramatic declines in waterfowl habitat helped galvanize these partnerships as favorable opportunities were emerging early in the PPJV history. Federal farm programs were economically comparable to commodity prices and the North American Wetlands Conservation Act was just getting started. “As with anything new, it had a lot of self-generated energy,” said Randy Kreil, PPJV Board member from 1994–2014 representing the North Dakota Game and Fish Department. “Incentives to participate in voluntary conservation programs were strong and landowner interest was high. It was an opportune time to do conservation.”

From its original waterfowl roots, the focus of the PPJV has expanded to include all birds, pollinators, and people. Because the PPJV has always been habitat-based, the partnership was ready to lead the way in expanding from waterfowl to all birds. As Kreil put it, “what’s good for Sprague’s pipit is good for pintails. When you have habitat goals as your basis, you can accomplish objectives for all species.” Despite this widening scope, the most significant value of the PPJV has remained constant: facilitating communication among partners.

“Helping each partner learn from our failures and our successes has been a huge value of the PPJV,” said Casey Anderson, PPJV Board representative from the North Dakota Game and Fish Department. Working



TAKING FLIGHT

“*It started with ducks, but it’s gone a lot further.*”

– Sean Fields, Former PPJV Coordinator



“*Conservation creates a legacy by building on cumulative successes, but we also learn important lessons from our experiences and mistakes.*”

—2005 PPJV Implementation Plan



together allows the partnership to collectively access expertise in a certain species, the landscape, or a conservation program and extrapolate that knowledge across the broader region. “Sometimes we have a tendency to work in our silos and state borders; getting the group together to share ideas and look at this at a landscape level lets us see where we can do better” added Anderson.

While the JV has years of accomplishments to show for its efforts, there will always be more work to be done. “I think what’s most important for the JV is to continue to push the envelope,” said Neal Feeken, co-chair of the PPJV Management Board representing The Nature Conservancy. “We need to think about how we evolve to keep up with the changes on the landscape. If we want to be on the cutting edge of conservation, we need to expand our vision beyond basic ecology.” Moving forward, there’s a clear role for the JV to play in consolidating and synthesizing the multitudes of research that will help people make good decisions that scale up to benefit birds and people across the continent.

Now 35 years after the creation of the PPJV, we continue to see many of the same issues. We’re losing grasslands at a staggering pace, wetlands are still being drained, and many bird populations hang in the balance. While this is sobering, the situation would be much worse if the PPJV didn’t exist. “The challenge of conservation in the region is very difficult,” said Kreil. “The only way to be successful is for everyone to work together and be complementary with the programs that are developed and delivered.”

Joint Ventures have become one of the most visible conservation successes of the last century, and the PPJV’s legacy lies in the networks and relationships built across this landscape. “On our own, we have limited leverage with larger issues. By bringing us all together and speaking as one partnership, we see how the collective voice has more weight than the individual entities,” said Sean Fields, former PPJV coordinator. The last 35 years of work in the PPJV has produced spectacular results on the landscape, in building a scientific foundation, and in developing and maintaining partnerships. The next 35 will be better yet. According to Fields, “the future of the PPJV – and JVs in general – is bright.” 🌱



Science-based conservation is a hallmark of the Prairie Pothole Joint Venture. For 35 years, PPJV partners have advanced and applied the best available science to strategically deliver habitat conservation in the Prairie Pothole Region (PPR), which supports some of the highest concentrations of breeding wetland and grassland birds on the continent.

Throughout the JV's history, ducks have been a foundation for wetland and grassland conservation as they are a primary source of conservation funding in the region. Several new reports such as the 2022 State of the Birds have heralded the success of waterfowl conservation in contrast to the dramatic declines of grassland birds and shorebirds. Duck populations have

35 YEARS SCIENCE BASED

35 Years of Science to Benefit Birds, Habitat, and People

clearly benefitted from extended wet periods in the PPR as well as policies to discourage wetland drainage and substantial conservation program investments. Many of these important policies and programs are guided by a foundation of science and strategic planning developed through PPJV partnerships over the past 35 years.

“ Grasslands in the PPJV accounted for more than 80% of the >117,000 acres of voluntary conservation easements and fee title acquisitions by the USFWS in 2022 alone. ”

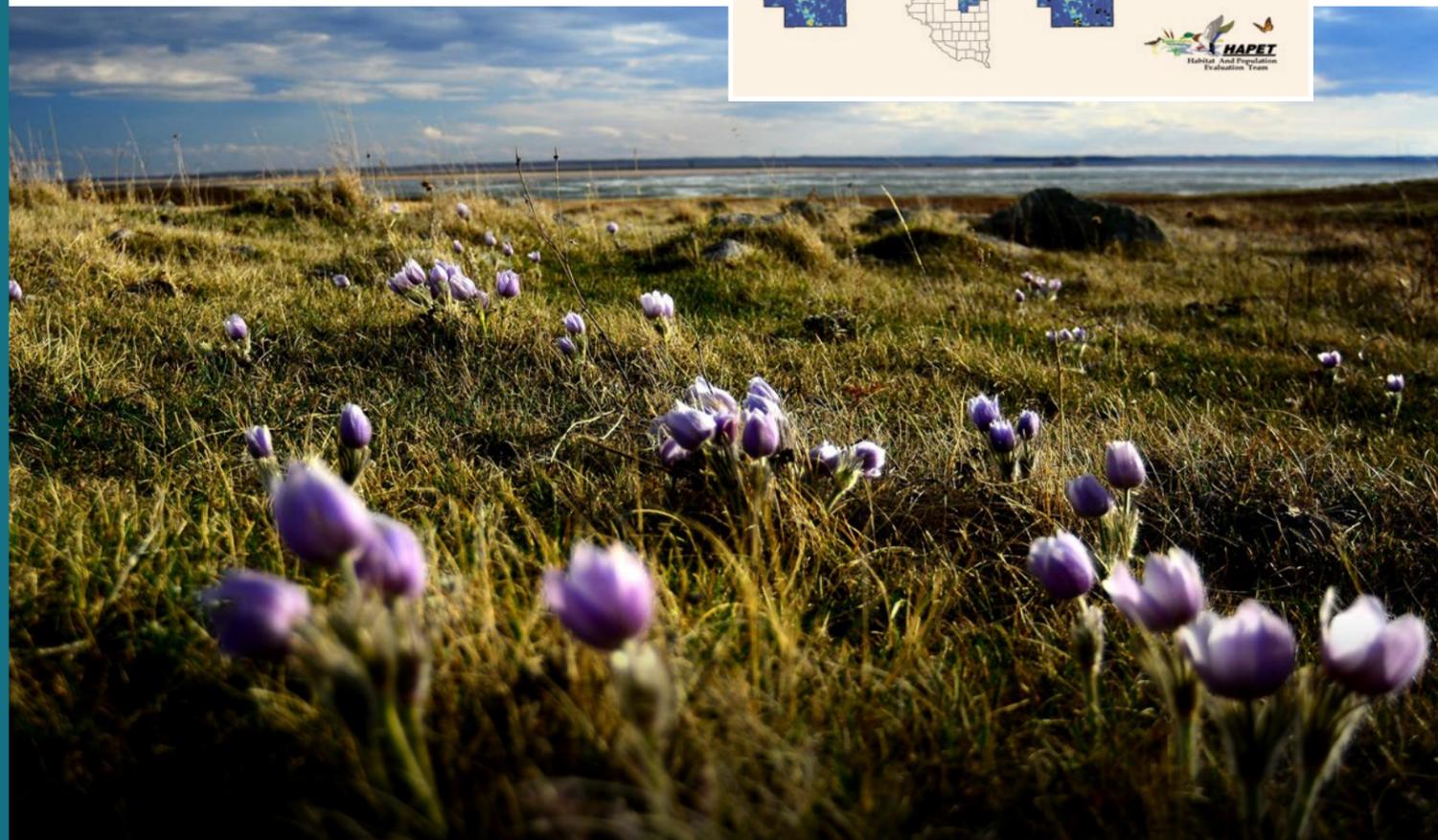
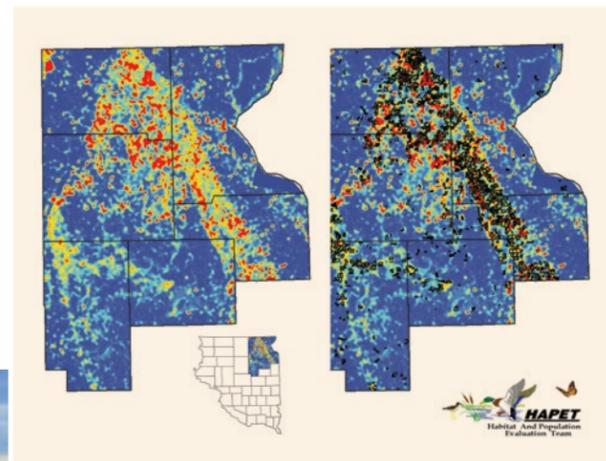


In wet years, 70% or more of the continent's duck production originates in the PPR, and over 90% of the region's breeding waterfowl nest in uplands – meaning ducks are grassland birds, too. Unfortunately, we continue to see alarming losses of wetlands and grasslands that birds depend on. These habitat losses are driven primarily by expansion and intensification of row crop agriculture, which has wide-ranging impacts beyond just waterfowl. Indeed, the PPR and Northern Great Plains contain the highest diversity and density of breeding grassland birds on the continent, which are experiencing some of the steepest population declines of any bird group. Ducks aren't immune to these stressors, either; while continental duck populations naturally fluctuate with environmental conditions in the PPR, total numbers have recently declined and are below NAWMP goals for the first time in nearly two decades.

The situation would undoubtedly be bleaker without the substantial conservation delivered through PPJV partnerships, but these bird declines mean that more work is needed. If we are to conserve our rapidly

declining grasslands, two things are clear: 1) a diverse conservation portfolio is required to sustain grassland birds, and 2) waterfowl-based conservation funding is an important piece of the puzzle. Grasslands in the PPJV accounted for more than 80% of the >117,000 acres of voluntary conservation easements and fee title acquisitions by the USFWS in 2022 alone. This is just one example of the many conservation treatments supported through waterfowl conservation funding that strongly align with priority grassland bird distributions (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Warm colors show areas most likely to be used by Bobolinks in northeastern South Dakota (left); black hatching (right) shows grass easements and FWS Partners for Fish & Wildlife grazing treatments. Bobolinks reach some of their highest continental densities in the Dakotas.



“PPJV partners continue to advance new science that informs conservation and adapts our strategies to reflect social, economic, and environmental realities.”

Although people tend to focus on the PPJV's role in waterfowl conservation, this partnership has made tremendous strides at implementing all-bird conservation by focusing on landscape-scale stressors and integrating other bird models into decision-support tools for effective conservation programs. This is possible because of the vital science investments PPJV partners made for grassland and wetland birds over the years.

Early on, the PPJV adopted cutting-edge tools developed by leading science partnerships to guide conservation actions and evaluate progress toward goals, which helped place the JV at the forefront of science-based landscape conservation. PPJV partners continue to advance new science that informs conservation and adapts our strategies to reflect social, economic, and environmental realities. Partners are exploring new technologies such as drones, remote sensing platforms, and advances in geospatial and analytical frameworks to address key information gaps, quantify trends in habitat loss, and evaluate efficiencies for habitat and population monitoring.

Although we have made tremendous conservation gains, current conservation policies and programs are insufficient to keep pace with the rates of habitat loss across the region. Significant challenges lie ahead in the PPR; addressing these challenges will require continued science and planning investments to maintain effective policies and guide programs important to wildlife. The PPJV's commitment to all components of the Strategic Habitat Conservation framework (Figure 2) ensures our conservation strategies are adaptive and addressing the ever-dynamic stressors affecting bird populations and their habitats.

As we look to update the PPJV Implementation Plan, ecosystem services, social science, working lands, and new science relative to patterns in land-use and climate change will be important themes to integrate. The ecosystem services wetlands and grasslands provide such as clean water, flood abatement, carbon sequestration, biodiversity, livestock forage, and socioeconomic benefits are increasingly important components of conservation in the PPR. Advances in social science will help us tailor conservation strategies for the region's primary stakeholders: working farms and ranches. Finally, contemporary estimates of habitat and land-use change patterns will be key to assess conservation strategies and program needs. Just as the PPJV has always leveraged new science and technologies for effective conservation, our future success will be underpinned by partnerships continuing this commitment to science that benefits the birds and people of the PPR. 🌱

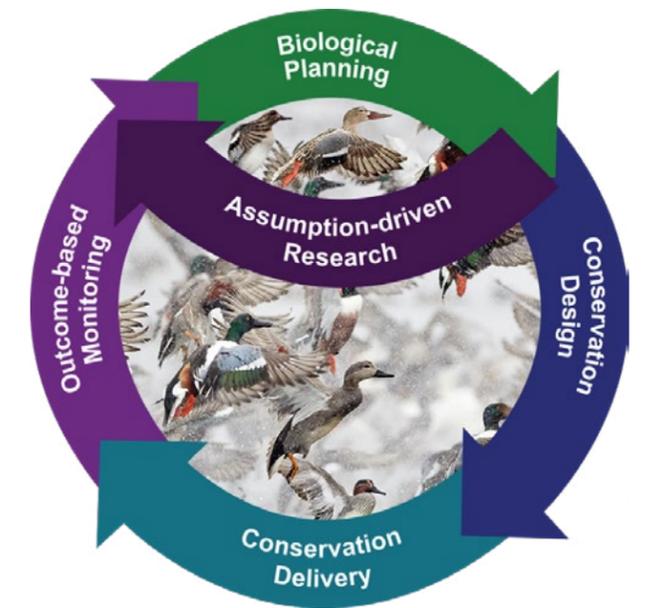


Figure 2: Strategic Habitat Conservation relies on an adaptive management framework to inform decisions about where and how to deliver conservation.



COMMON GROUND

“For 35 years, the PPJV has been seeking common ground where both groups can cultivate cooperation, demonstrating that wildlife and agriculture can thrive in the same landscape.”

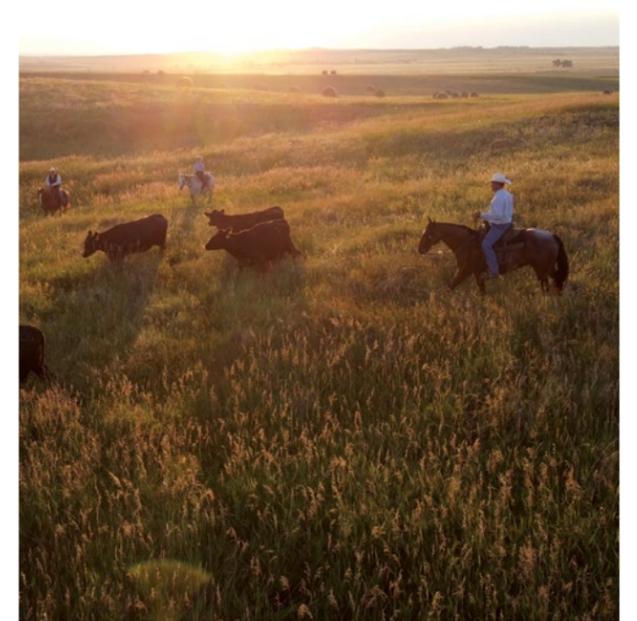
It's not difficult to conceive of reasons why wildlife conservation and agricultural interests might stand on opposite sides of the fence. Their needs for land and land management often overlap, fueling the misconception that they cannot successfully coexist. Public lands are vital biological anchors and play a prominent role in conservation throughout the U.S. Prairie Pothole Region (PPR), but they alone cannot sustain the abundance of prairie wildlife and ecosystem services desired by the public. With 90% of the U.S. PPR in private ownership, the need to work collaboratively with agricultural producers to integrate voluntary conservation practices on their land is paramount.

For 35 years, the PPJV has been seeking common ground where both groups can cultivate cooperation, demonstrating that wildlife and agriculture can thrive in the same landscape. The PPJV's first Implementation Plan in 1989 acknowledged that it would be difficult to receive community support for conservation programs if we were unwilling to negotiate. That Plan gave major emphasis to programs that combined agriculture with wetland values, abundant wildlife, and economic development, recognizing that preserving habitat and wildlife within the confines of a profitable agricultural operation must include adequate benefits for the private landowner.

Despite the focus on landowner collaboration, that relationship was largely happening behind the scenes through partnership networks and wasn't formalized by the PPJV until recently. This raised the question of how the JV could hope for involvement, support, and cooperation without inviting consistent landowner participation. The situation changed in 2016, when the PPJV welcomed two private landowners to the Management Board. Those inaugural appointments led to two permanent seats for landowner groups on the Board, now filled by Lewis Heaton of the North Dakota Grazing Lands Coalition and Jim Faulstich of the South Dakota Grasslands Coalition.

35 YEARS COOPERATION

Cultivating Cooperation for Prairie Agriculture and Wildlife



This was a critical step in adding context to JV discussions. “Landowners aren't biologists, and biologists in most cases aren't landowners,” said Faulstich, “we need that spectrum of input across all aspects to have buy-in across all aspects.” Until additional appointments are made to the Board to represent the other three PPJV states, Heaton and Faulstich are the voice for landowners across the entire geography. Said Heaton, “my role as a Board member is to represent producers along with conservation, and I try to focus on things that would be beneficial to both of them.” In the PPR, many of the decisions that will impact conservation efforts lie squarely in landowners' hands. Having

landowners on the Board helps the JV understand how to do better in developing and delivering conservation programs that support sustainable ranching, keeping grass green side up and wetlands intact.

The challenge is that rangelands are misunderstood and undervalued societally. Their importance isn't just in producing beef and wildlife; they also provide extremely valuable ecosystem services that benefit water, soil, and climate. Many landowners are aware of these values, but it gets harder and harder to make a living off the grasslands with cattle. "When you take the same amount of rangeland with the same type of soil quality and turn it into cropland, its economic value triples," said Heaton. This imbalance contributes to the staggering grassland losses taking place across the region and perpetuates new wetland losses. Due to factors like commodity prices, crop insurance, and incentives in farm programs, converting marginal soils to cropland can be an attractive prospect to many producers. There's a clear need to increase the value of rangelands so the ecosystem left intact is something landowners can make a living on.

As people increasingly move to urban areas, the JV partnership has a responsibility to bring the pieces together so urban audiences understand the services provided by rural, agricultural communities. Ultimately, the hope is that this broad constituency would help spur policy change that increases the value of grassland agriculture so it can be as profitable as crop production. "The agriculture community alone doesn't have enough clout to change that, we need to work with urban communities," said Faulstich. "Maybe it won't be based on wildlife, but on concerns the public has for recreation, drinking water, and flood issues."

In the meantime, voluntary programs offered by PPJV partners help ranching families maintain a viable business while improving the soil, water, and wildlife resources on their land. Demand for these programs is high, as attested to by Keith Trego, PPJV Board representative from the North Dakota Natural Resources Trust: "we can't keep up with private land conservation work and interest. People are willing to do things on their land, and we've never had more opportunities." Across the region, adoption of land management

practices is accelerating as landowners see the difference it can make for their land and their bottom line. "The things we talk about doing on rangeland, like rotational grazing and changing season use, have a lot of benefits besides just the beef or what you've grown," said Heaton.

The big picture is clear: bird and wildlife populations remain resilient throughout the region where we have sustainable grazing-based economies on the landscape. "There are bright spots out there where producers take a holistic approach and recognize that land use and soil health is important and that wildlife and people are part of the total system," said Faulstich. Farmlands are part of the solution, too, as emerging science points to the values that wetlands provide even in crop-dominated landscapes, indicating the need for further conservation investments with farmers. Cooperation is the key, and the PPJV continues to cultivate new partnerships while strengthening existing ones. These partnerships will help shape a future where both agriculture and wildlife flourish across the prairies. 🌱



**REMAIN
RESILIENT**

“...bird and wildlife populations remain resilient throughout the region where we have sustainable grazing-based economies on the landscape.”



35 YEARS COLLABORATION

Breaking Down Barriers to Scale Up Conservation



Partnerships are the primary foundation of Migratory Bird Joint Ventures. As these partnerships flourished in the early 1990s, it became apparent to the greater bird conservation world that these cooperatives should not be isolated to waterfowl conservation. Today, we have 24 habitat Joint Ventures that focus on all aspects of bird conservation across North America.

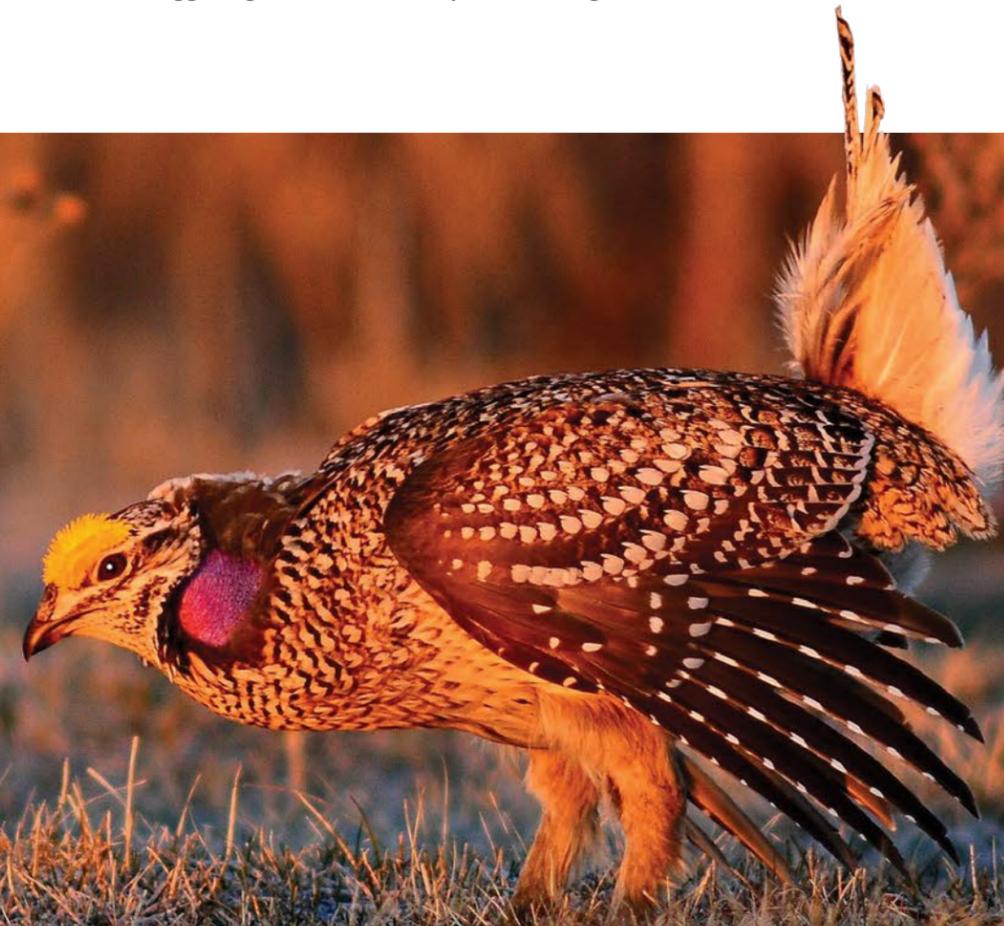
Joint Ventures (JV) have continued to evolve since their inception 35 years ago. That timeline tracks the earliest underpinnings of waterfowl conservation to the transition to all-bird conservation. Now it also includes social objectives that seek to recruit and maintain conservation supporters by highlighting the ecological services that bolster rural economies and lifestyles. Not only have the partnerships changed how conservation is accomplished at regional scales, but they are also working together to scale up conservation across

JV boundaries. Although cross-JV collaboration has been active in the waterfowl conservation community for decades, population declines in other bird groups has elevated the need to refocus efforts.

The North American Bird Conservation Initiative released the first State of the Birds report in 2008, detailing gains in waterfowl numbers – which were largely a result of JV work – but also showing significant declining trends for other birds. Then, in 2019, Ken Rosenberg and colleagues published the 3 Billion Birds report, quantifying the magnitude of bird population declines across North America. Of the almost 3 billion birds lost since 1970, grassland birds, forest birds, and aerial insectivores were some of the hardest hit. The need to work together to address these staggering declines suddenly became urgent.

“*The Joint Ventures have aligned to work across the full life cycle of migratory birds and address these challenges.*”

Declining grassland birds breed in the northern prairies and plains, migrate through the Dust Bowl region, and winter in parts of central Mexico and the southcentral U.S. Thus, the eight JVs that make up the central grasslands of North America came together to form the JV8 Central Grasslands Conservation Initiative. JV8's charge is to scale regional conservation to affect grassland birds in key areas throughout their full life cycle, and to help direct resources towards those places where they are most needed.





BREAKING BARRIERS

“ *Joint Ventures work across fences. That means working across public, private, and tribal lands and working across cultures...* ”



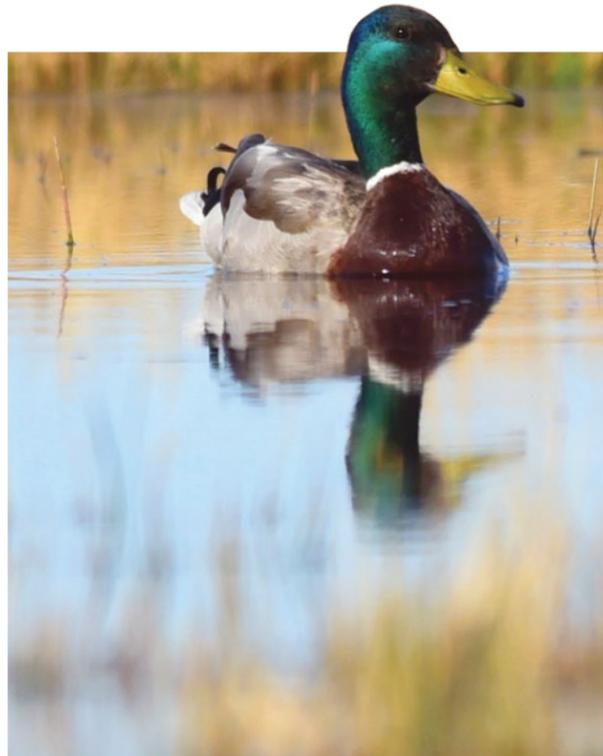
Cross-JV collaborations, like JV8, ultimately lead to increased learning and more effective conservation. In this spirit, the PPJV and Northern Great Plains JV (NGPJV) are partnering with state Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) offices on cross-JV collaborations including several staff positions and shared resources. In Montana, the PPJV hosts a science integration specialist who assists NRCS field offices and conservation districts with planning and targeting conservation actions. This position works across eastern Montana in areas serviced by both JVs. The NGPJV hosts a similar position in South Dakota providing technical assistance to field offices in PPJV and NGPJV regions of the state. The NGPJV specialist is conducting outreach with producer groups, agencies, non-governmental organizations, and NRCS tribal liaisons to support existing connections and build new ones. Both specialists are working together to share science, spatial tools, and approaches.

The PPJV and NGPJV are also collaborating on grassland communications with the help of the PPJV communications specialist, who works part time with the NGPJV. This specialist develops strategic communications on priority issues within both regions, such as shared values with working lands and building resilience on the landscape. The considerable overlap in messages and approaches between the two JVs makes this a very effective collaboration.

Joint Ventures work across fences. That means working across public, private, and tribal lands and working across cultures; it can also mean blurring the lines between Joint Venture boundaries to leverage strengths and learn new tools and approaches. In doing so, we ensure that our individual work is meaningful and effective at scales needed to change trajectories for declining species. 🌱

— Sean Fields, *PPJV Coordinator (retired)*

— Catherine Wightman, *NGPJV Coordinator*



35 YEARS PARTNER SHIP

Partners for Fish & Wildlife Program and PPJV: *Partnerships for Working Lands Conservation*

This year, the PPJV and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's (FWS) Partners for Fish & Wildlife Program celebrate 35 years of successful wetland and grassland conservation across the Prairie Pothole Region (PPR). Recognizing that 90% of the PPR is made up of working farms and ranches, visionary leaders established the Partners for Fish & Wildlife (PFW) program in 1987 – the same year as the PPJV – to work cooperatively with private landowners.

PFW was born out of the PPR, focusing on opportunities to partner with willing landowners to protect species and habitat on private lands. An early focus was engaging landowners in wetland and grassland practices to benefit migratory birds. This model for cooperative conservation provides opportunities to enhance habitat while maintaining private property rights; it also engages the public in private stewardship. This strategy remains core to PFW across the PPR today. In offering restoration and enhancement agreements for shorter time periods, PFW complements the FWS easement program by providing landowners with options to improve their property for birds, pollinators, and other wildlife. These shorter-term projects are often a vital first step to future collaboration throughout the landscape and longer-term conservation investments by landowners.

With humble beginnings, this small program quickly grew to be a highly effective model for wildlife conservation. The PFW program applies strategic conservation science from the PPJV to inform their focal species and focal areas, target conservation work, and develop on-the-ground solutions that provide a win-win scenario benefitting birds, habitats, and private landowners. “Over the past 35 years, PFW and the PPJV have collaborated closely to develop and deliver a wide variety of working lands concepts that simultaneously benefit the landowners and landscape of the Prairie Pothole Region,” said Kurt Forman, South Dakota PFW Coordinator. Successfully meeting PPR conservation goals hinges on partnerships with landowners, and PFW has been instrumental in serving as a bridge between landowners and meeting PPJV objectives for wetland and grassland conservation.

“*Successfully meeting Prairie Pothole Region conservation goals hinges on partnerships with landowners...*”





165 PERCENT

“Over the past five years, PFW has restored or enhanced more than 212,000 wetland acres and 350,000 grassland acres, achieving 165% of PPJV objectives!”



The strength of this partnership can be seen in the 2017 PPJV Implementation Plan, which identified explicit conservation objectives for the PFW program. These bold objectives were developed in response to the State of the Prairies report, which called for an increase in the rate of conservation delivery to address dramatic grassland and wetland losses. The PFW program, with support from PPJV partners, rose to the challenge and exceeded expectations. Over the past five years, PFW has restored or enhanced more than 212,000 wetland acres and 350,000 grassland acres, achieving 165% of PPJV objectives!

Despite these amazing conservation successes, the PPR continues to experience dramatic rates of grassland loss. Building partnerships with landowners and local communities is imperative to keep grass green side up and wetlands intact. PFW recognizes the importance of keeping working lands working and proactively works with ranching communities through state and community-based grazing partnerships, resulting in grazing management plans as a substantial part of PFW projects. Maintaining grazing based economies as part of the region's social fabric is one of the best opportunities we have to sustain the unique grassland-wetland character that is continually important to birds, pollinators, and a host of other wildlife.



By focusing on long-term relationships, accountability, and applying the best available science, PFW has gained national recognition and broad support for their work. These vital relationships, grounded in trust, are part of larger community-based efforts working to put the landscape conservation puzzle pieces together and make habitat projects a reality. Each of our state-based PFW programs face unique challenges and opportunities in this dynamic conservation landscape influenced by natural, economic, social, and political factors. Withstanding the constant state of change through its time-tested relationships with people is the core of the PFW program. These partnerships will undoubtedly carry the program into the future as we all adapt to new challenges and opportunities in the PPR. 🌱





Prairie Pothole JOINT VENTURE

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